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## Denominations: moving into the New Year...more reflections...

January 2010, *Equipping* #102

Denominations: I have been reflecting on their positive potential during the last two Equipping issues. Let me start the New Year with a reminder that denominations have an important contribution to make. Maybe we can understand their potential better if we understand their origins.

Denominations did not exist before the Protestant Reformation. Before then, alternative expressions of church were either incorporated into the dominant Roman and Orthodox traditions, or declared to be heretical.

In the early 17th century the different expressions of the church that were springing to life in Anglican England were said to be “denominated” expressions. The hope was that multiple expressions of the same church could invigorate the life of the church. This hope was based on several assumptions:

- a) The model for new church expressions should reflect more closely the patterns developed by the Apostles;
- b) The unity of the church should be practiced in the midst of diverse expressions;
- c) These “denominated” variations would provide freedom for diverse expressions;
- d) The ecclesial status quo should not necessarily be binding for the future;
- e) The existence of diverse expressions within the same church would guard against sectarian and schismatic tendencies, given that these tendencies are characterized by separating from the church rather than committing themselves to providing alternative expressions within the church;
- f) These denominated expressions did not deny the legitimacy of other expressions, but rather understood them to be complementary and “denominating” the diversity of God’s presence in the church.

In summary, the origin of “denominations” was linked to important qualities such as:

- Freedom to express worship in different ways
- Finding unity in diversity
- Expressing diversity within unity
- Taking biblical authority more seriously
- Addressing changing contexts
- Avoiding sectarian tendencies
- Affirming God’s grace expressed in multiple ways and patterns

In our day “denomination” has, for some, come to mean the opposite of these intended qualities, such as:

- Opposing diversity within the denomination
- Opposing unity among denominations
- Stifling freedom to express worship differently
- Unable to adapt to changing contexts and times
- Suspicion of God’s grace that is experienced in unfamiliar ways.

It is important to lay claim again to the original intentions of dealing with diversity within unity. Denominations were designed as a positive “third way” between unbridled sectarianism and oppressive institutionalism. It is ironic that today, denominations are often viewed as oppressive institutions. It seems that we still need to work more on the “third way” in our world, in our society, and in our church today.

I wish you all a Happy New Year: a Year in which we continue to learn about the fullness that God has in mind for the world and for the church. I also trust and pray that this learning will be a source of joy, peace, and grace for us all.